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Scaling Turnaround: A District-Improvement Approach

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For years, US education reform has focused on simple, isolated reform elements such as promoting reading programs or redesigning individual schools. These efforts have only provided sporadic improvements in student achievement. School-level and single-focus reforms ultimately fail because they do not acknowledge the larger school system's role in supporting and creating capacity for the system's lowest-performing schools to improve. Driving excellent teaching and learning across schools necessitates considering how districts can be best structured to help schools meet unique student needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence. A handful of US school districts—Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, the School District of Philadelphia, Denver Public Schools, Sacramento City Unified School District, and Long Beach Unified School District—have yielded notable performance gains by employing systemic, district-led turnaround approaches, and provide important lessons for devising systemic turnaround or improvement efforts and overcoming the myriad associated obstacles.

W e should know by now that chronically failing schools cannot be fixed or turned around without improving school districts. Yet for years, education reform has focused on simple, isolated reform elements such as changing reading programs, focusing singularly on teachers, or redesigning individual schools. One of the largest school-design experiments was the federally funded Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program created in 2001 to improve all aspects of operations in more than 2,000 schools. After five years of implementation, an evaluation of the $235 million program concluded that it yielded only sporadic improvements in student achievement.

School-level and single-focus reforms fail because they do not acknowledge the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating capacity for its lowest-performing schools to

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Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Successful school reform hinges on improving school districts, yet turnaround efforts continue to focus on single schools and simple, isolated reform elements.

- School districts can most successfully promote student achievement by connecting key reform elements such as curriculum standards, human-capital strategies, intervention supports, performance management and accountability standards, and strong relationships with internal and external school system members.

- Five US school districts—Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, the School District of Philadelphia, Denver Public Schools, Sacramento City Unified School District, and Long Beach Unified School District—have yielded notable performance gains through systemic, innovative, and district-led turnaround.

improve. A district central office is better positioned than schools to coordinate and align the crucial reform elements within and across schools. The CSR results support this theory: the program's limited success was attributed to lack of capacity at the school level to change structures and practices that most impact teaching and learning. However, the evaluation did find a few clusters of improved schools housed within several districts. Leaders in those schools attributed their success to the strategies and support provided by their district, such as helpful interim assessments that were used to identify and provide professional development aligned to teacher and student needs.[1]

The $3.5 billion federally funded School Improvement Grant (SIG), created in 2009 to improve America's lowest-performing schools (bottom 5 percent), was awarded to states to distribute directly to schools to implement school-level reforms.

Despite this acknowledgement that school improvement hinges on improving district systems, turnaround efforts still focus on the school level. The $3.5 billion federally funded School Improvement Grant (SIG), created in 2009 to improve America's lowest-performing schools (bottom 5 percent), was awarded to states to distribute directly to schools to implement school-level reforms. While the 2012 application bypassed states and went to districts, the program was still structured around schools, barely giving a nod to their districts.

Without explicit consideration of the role of districts in school improvement, the SIG will likely see similar results as the CSR. One could even argue that some of the requirements for the grant—such as replacing principals, building a core of effective teachers, using data to differentiate instruction, increasing school time for staff and students, and providing operational flexibility in schools—cannot be implemented without the districts' involvement.

Driving excellent teaching and learning across schools necessitates a new theory of action that considers how district systems can be best structured to help schools meet unique student needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence. While not widely prevalent, there are a handful of districts employing systemic, district-led turnaround approaches and yielding impressive gains. I chose to study and feature five such districts—Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, the School District of Philadelphia, Denver Public Schools, Sacramento City Unified School District, and Long Beach Unified School District—in my book *School Turnarounds: The Essential Role of Districts*.[2] While all five districts had very different approaches and contexts, each yielded notable performance gains. Thus, they provide important lessons on how to devise systemic turnaround or improvement efforts, and on how to overcome the many obstacles related to making dramatic changes in complex systems.[3]

The Essential Role of Districts

The district is an important factor in the turnaround process because of its ability to coordinate many different reform areas. Years of research on what appears to work in education reform paint a consistent picture of the essential elements needed to raise student achievement.[4] Reputable education reform researchers such as Richard Elmore, Stacey Childress, Robert Muller, and Karen Chenowith—as well as reform organizations like the American Institutes for Research, Mass Insight, and the University of Virginia—include the following elements in their findings, strategies, and programs:

- Clear and rigorous (college-workforce-ready) curriculum standards;

- Comprehensive human-capital strategies;

- Research-based instructional practices and clarity on high-quality student work;

- Comprehensive performance management and accountability systems;

- Positive stakeholder relationships (boards, unions, parents, communities); and

- A culture of trust, high expectations, and transparency.

For reform to occur and succeed, all abovementioned elements must be present. Even with strong leaders and teachers in every school, instruction will not change without rigorous standards or clear expectations around

teaching and learning. A great data system is not beneficial if users do not know how to access it, do not trust the information it provides, and do not have time to examine data.

Districts serve as the logical catalyst and hub for these essential elements. The district does not necessarily hand down orders from on high. Rather, the district leads, facilitates, empowers, and gets out of the way when appropriate. Ensuring that schools get what they need without causing undue distractions from teaching requires balance and clarity on the best division of labor between districts and schools. For example, curriculum development is often a shared task between district leaders and teachers. Entrusting that job solely to teachers removes them from the classroom and often results in a fragmented process. Yet having district curriculum directors develop it on their own fails to leverage what teachers have learned through execution of the current curriculum.

Application to Turnaround

Turning around chronically failing schools necessitates doing something dramatically different that will improve teaching and learning. It requires a multifaceted approach that will provide schools with strong leaders and teachers, the tools and structures to implement frequent progress monitoring, and the flexibility and support for school personnel to intervene appropriately and quickly. Tackling struggling schools through one reform area or through single schools fails to set up sustainable structures and practices such as budget flexibility for all principals or increased time to collaboratively review data through common planning time in every school.

Pursuing this strategy implies constant involvement at the highest system level at which coordination and alignment can be facilitated. Systemic turnaround requires thinking about what structures, practices, and policies must change to improve the essential reform elements for struggling schools and struggling school systems. Districts applying a systemic approach create coherence by identifying system-wide goals and outcomes, providing a clear framework as a guide, clarifying nonnegotiables (such as curriculum standards) to maintain coherence and quality, and encouraging schools to use resources creatively to address student needs.

A successful approach would yield measurable achievement increases in struggling schools and reduce the number of schools identified as low performing. For example, in fall 2013, California's Long Beach Unified

School District will disband its cohort of struggling schools that receive additional resources because those schools are performing as well or better than the rest of the district. No new schools will move into their place because performance of all schools reached acceptable performance levels. As a result, a large cohort of struggling students has "caught up," instructional practices across the district have improved, and the remaining students in grades K–12 are academically on track.

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Long Beach and the other four districts profiled in *School Turnarounds* implemented district-wide turnaround strategies with varying degrees of success. While they all had an urban context, their approaches differed in terms of intervention size; partnership engagement; instructional models; and support from parents, community members, school boards, leaders, and teachers. Common elements across each approach provide useful lessons on how systemic turnaround can be implemented. In this *Outlook*, I focus on organizing for systemic reform, using comprehensive human-capital strategies, improving instruction, managing performance, and balancing systemic approaches and flexibility. These strategies helped drive gains in student outcomes in the districts I studied, and might provide examples to other districts attempting systemic reform.

Organizing for Systemic Reform

Systemic reform requires close connection and alignment from the district level to the school level. It means restructuring policies and practices to meet the immediate needs of struggling schools and increasing effectiveness in the remaining schools in the district. Too much bureaucracy can impede that process. All too often, districts have too many layers separating central offices and schools, departments that function in isolation from each other, too many or unclear goals, or onerous processes that require too many steps to solve issues as they arise. The districts in *School Turnarounds* avoided

these common traps by redesigning structures and practices to meet local needs. They first conducted a thorough system assessment and then worked with various leaders and teachers to determine short- and long-term goals, reduced bureaucratic layers and obstacles, and created a strategic plan with clear goals and activities.

Restructuring. In several districts, this meant reorganizing to better connect central office departments, or providing closer oversight to schools to reduce bureaucratic layers. For example, when Jonathan Raymond became superintendent in Sacramento in 2009, he found the central office structures, particularly for academics, to be inadequate. For the 44,000-student district, there had been a chief finance officer, assistant superintendent of operations, and five associate superintendents. Departments like curriculum, professional development, and human resources all worked separately. This type of structure consistently fails to address collaboration between different departments whose work overlaps. In an effort to better align work flow before crafting a strategic plan, Raymond created an academic division, accountability division, and a family and community engagement division.

For academics, he hired a chief academic officer, a technology director, and three assistant superintendents to oversee schools. He also reorganized the schools from discrete levels (elementary, middle, and high school) to K–12 geographic feeder patterns to set up more coherent and aligned meeting and planning structures and foster better transitions across grades and school levels. For example, rather than middle schools meeting and planning instruction and interventions in isolation, the five elementary schools in one neighborhood would meet with the region's two middle schools and one high school so that instructional plans and interventions could be viewed from prekindergarten through 12th grade.

In Denver, Superintendent Tom Boasberg had certain supervisors oversee elementary schools and different ones oversee secondary schools. He also hired an executive director to lead the Office of School Reform and Innovation to create more opportunities for school personnel to interface with him. In Charlotte, the right organizational structures were already in place, but roles and reporting needed to change to better connect departments and identify candidates for leadership roles. Former superintendent Peter Gorman changed the work of his accountability division by having them focus on measuring the effectiveness of all district employees, rather than just limiting their focus to student outcomes.

Strategic Planning. The superintendents interviewed for *School Turnarounds* asserted that a concise, thoughtful, and manageable strategic plan is imperative for clearly articulating goals and strategies. They identified the components that must connect and align, creating accountability for implementation and maintaining focus. The important commonality in their strategic plans is that they:

- Created a thorough plan with various stakeholders;

- Used a simple framework often illustrated by a graphic to explain the district's "theory of action;"

- Identified no more than three to five major reforms in the plan; and

- Created mechanisms for various departments to benchmark progress toward strategic plan goals and eliminated distracting activities.

As a unifying document, the strategic plan requires sizeable investment of thought and time. For example, Long Beach leaders had a committee of 65 individuals—including two board members—who met for six months to delineate the district's mission, goals, and metrics. To connect the right pieces and provide a simple framework, Denver's plan focuses on instruction, human capital, family and community engagement, strategic financial-resource management, and expectations for accountability. The 2010 Denver Plan document includes a graphic that highlights the importance of and interaction between each actor in the system, including students, teachers, classrooms, parents, and community members.

Comprehensive Human-Capital Strategies

Turning around chronically failing schools requires an adequate pipeline of educators with strong instructional and change-management skills and a passionate desire to work in challenging schools. Each of the five districts in *School Turnarounds* tackled one of the most important turnaround levers: human-capital reform. Their strategies moved beyond traditional compensation and pipeline-development approaches and acknowledged that almost every part of the system impacts educators' ability to succeed. For example, curriculum clarity, professional development, useable data tools, time to meet with other teachers, school safety, student preparation

at each grade level, and class schedules all impact teacher effectiveness.

Strategic Staffing. Talent management was one of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's strongest reform areas. To attract the best leaders and teachers to struggling schools, former superintendent Peter Gorman stood outside recruitment fairs to personally shake hands with and encourage teachers to apply to schools targeted for improvement, all as part of the district's Strategic Staffing Initiative (SSI). The SSI was created as a district-wide strategy to place the best talent in the neediest schools through additional stipends to work in SSI schools, incentives tied to student performance, and by providing flexibility to principals. To attract strong principals, Gorman marketed being selected as an SSI principal as a great honor, and allowed those principals who were selected to choose a number of staff members to bring with them as a team.

To maintain a strong pipeline of leaders and teachers across schools and the district, Charlotte engaged in highly structured and well-measured succession planning through a job-embedded ranking process. This succession approach is unique in that it addresses central office leadership positions as well as principals and teachers, and uses a forced ranking process scored by internally developed rubrics. The process places personnel in a four by four rating category (one through four and A through D in each level) that ranged from 1A ("ready to step into the position") to 4D ("needing improvement") in certain specified areas.

Turnaround Leaders. In Philadelphia, district leaders streamlined hiring practices and implemented several internal teacher and leadership training programs to develop existing talent. One of the key lessons mentioned by Philadelphia leaders was that it takes a very different leader to change the practices and culture of a school than to manage and maintain change. Charismatic, dynamic change agents were necessary to create new practices and culture, and only then could more steady, even-keel leaders step in to maintain the changes.

Subsequently, there were several very strong principals known as "turnaround" leaders who were placed in a school for two to three years, and then another leader known for stability would replace them while they moved on to the next struggling school. For the five *School Turnarounds* districts, improving human-capital strategies meant stretching far beyond the traditional bounds of human resources and professional development. This is because

leader and teacher success requires clarity and tools to support teaching and learning goals and professional development that maps to those goals. Schools need flexibility to leverage people and time to meet their goals.

Improving Instruction

Districts need to be clear about how their curriculum standards compare to state standards, define high-quality teaching and learning, and scale effective instructional methods without micromanaging teaching or becoming slaves to scripts. It requires being clear about the minimum content students need to master in each grade, yet allowing schools and teachers to decide how to deliver that content.

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To address instructional concerns for struggling sixth graders, Long Beach leaders placed over 2,000 sixth graders from a set of struggling middle schools in one sixth-grade academy to maximize instructional freedom— no bells, no specific passing periods. Struggling readers were paired with strong reading teachers and could work on reading for hours at a time daily if needed. Students were and continue to be frequently assessed to ensure that they are mastering target objectives and were and continue to be placed in flexible groups with teachers that excel in the students' weakest areas.

Many districts do a fair job of defining and assessing instructional targets. The step some miss is scrutinizing student work, clarifying what high-quality student products look like, and determining how both those elements relate to teaching and classroom work. The Sacramento district launched a data-inquiry approach in its target improvement schools (called Priority Schools) that entailed building a data overview and examining student work, identifying areas of concern, examining and comparing student work to identify "high-quality products," and collapsing student assignments into discrete tasks to improve lessons and assignments. Teams then built a plan based on those discussions and reviewed subsequent

student products and assessments to evaluate instructional improvements. Priority School achievement in almost every target school has increased each year since those schools' formation in 2010.

Performance Management

One commonality among the five *School Turnarounds* districts was a strong performance-management system. The ability to make course corrections at all levels before small problems become bigger is essential to the improvement process. Performance management means more than just testing and collecting data; it means having a data system that houses multiple types of data such as assessment, course-taking, and discipline data; useful assessments that reflect what was taught and learned; structured monitoring systems; and time to review, interpret, and respond to data. In addition, districts need to build a culture that trusts the data and how they will be used.

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Like several of the districts from my book, Charlotte used a number of reporting tools to monitor progress. The district used school progress reports to measure student achievement and persistence; used school quality reviews to compare school self-assessments with externally conducted assessments on teaching and learning, curriculum, management, and parent involvement; and used school-improvement plans to set targets and strategies based on progress reports and quality reviews.

To gain more nuanced information on school performance, Denver leaders created their own accountability tool. The Denver School Performance Framework provides a color-coded rating system based on assessment data (both proficiency and growth), a college readiness score, student surveys, discipline, and much more. District leaders also receive an outside diagnostic report that provides more information on the academic performance, learning environment, and organizational effectiveness of schools and the district. This tool is used to trigger intervention processes for schools if their results show they need support. The framework results are posted all over the district, and leaders and teachers frequently refer to moving up the color bands when discussing performance and target goals.

Scaling Turnaround through Flexibility

Scaling practices at the district level implies setting up systems that strengthen the essential reform elements yet allow schools to meet their students' needs in creative ways. This requires being clear on goals, establishing nonnegotiables, considering ways to support quick intervention, and monitoring outcomes rather than prescribing program inputs. A principal should not lose a teacher because the district hiring timeline is too slow, and schools should be able to opt out of training that does not address their instructional needs.

The Charlotte, Long Beach, Sacramento, and Denver districts all provided school leaders with flexibility to build creative models as long as those leaders met district goals, instructional beliefs, and accountability expectations. In Charlotte, principals were provided freedom around people, time, and money as long as they followed the district curriculum and met accountability goals. Principals could create gender-specific schools, change their schedule, or opt out of district staff training as long as they met their accountability goals for a three-year cycle.

Once Superintendent Raymond and his team in Sacramento saw a positive impact from data inquiry in his Priority Schools, he set up structures to support the practice district wide. Common planning time was instituted for all schools, and staff members were trained to examine student work alongside data in collaborative groups. While all schools were required to follow the district curriculum and accountability practices, Priority Schools were given a great deal of flexibility to be innovative in school design. Raymond charged the principals of the district's first six Priority Schools with creating "their own dream school." To offset traditional mindset and spark the process, he had principals work with visioning teams composed of school and community members to expand their thinking.

Discussion and Implications

The five districts profiled in *School Turnarounds* show that meaningful district involvement is an important ingredient to turning around struggling schools. As of

fall 2012, several of those districts had reported performance gains in their target schools and felt instruction had improved throughout their districts. For example, in Sacramento, one Priority School moved from a math and English composite state test score of 658 in 2010 to 741 (the state target is 800) in 2012. Between 2010 and 2012 in Denver, of the eight turnaround schools, all but one exited the bottom "red" category (below expectations) with the remaining seven having been at or extremely close to the "meeting or exceeding expectations" performance category.

These and the early results from SIG implementation illustrate that chronically failing schools can improve through systemic approaches that address the essential reform elements that impact teaching and learning. However, just as systemic turnaround requires thoughtful balance between the role of central offices and schools, federal policy should consider how to strike such a balance as well. Educators agree that SIG has identified some of the right reform levers such as teacher and leader effectiveness, but they prefer to devise their own strategies rather than follow the prescriptive programs required in SIG.

For example, the SIG turnaround model requires firing at least 50 percent of the teachers, and the more flexible transformative model can only be implemented in a certain percentage of schools within a state. Educators feel such policy stipulations are arbitrarily set, and restrict those educators' ability to use resources to meet their unique challenges. The central issue is sparking action and change while allowing flexibility to solve localized problems. While we want to help schools build the capability to rethink their work within their own context, we still need to maintain coherence and educational equity across schools.

School Turnarounds provides specific recommendations from district and school leaders for the essential reform elements and for overcoming turnaround challenges. Some high-level tips on how to connect the system levels and balance coherence with flexibility:

- Drive alignment from a centralized district source by providing oversight, expertise, support, flexibility, and resources;

- Offset turnaround obstacles by increasing communication, commitment, trust, and stakeholder engagement (with school personnel, parents, community members, and board members);

- Maintain a set bar for instructional standards while allowing implementation flexibility and differentiating supports and resources;

- Provide ample support for principals implementing dramatic change—consider moving principals to new schools in teams rather than by themselves; and

- Provide principals with flexibility and closely monitor results. However, consider how freedom in curriculum and program selection can impact alignment across the district and throughout grade levels.

Conclusion

Scaling turnaround means devising policies and practices that ensure all students receive a coherent and quality K–12 education, and districts are a key catalyst for leading, managing, facilitating, aligning, and supporting the process. There is no one best approach; context matters greatly. Systemic change plays out differently in different systems. Many times, basic functions and practices must be built and structures reconfigured, as was the case in Sacramento. For the five districts in *School Turnarounds*, the organizing framework was clarity around what was to be taught and learned, and then schools were provided with the support and flexibility to be creative with resources to solve problems. As long as the system outlines clear goals, maintains focus, connects the essential reform elements, and balances autonomy and accountability, the conditions can be set for scalable and sustainable success.

Creating effective districts with effective schools requires attacking the issue at multiple points. The goal would be to create the drive and will to do things differently, provide flexibility and ease to tailor solutions to specific problems, and build the capacity of the actors in district systems to leverage flexibility and innovation. Meeting these three conditions first requires programs that will produce leaders with the vision and skills to rethink how practices and resources can be better leveraged to meet student needs. Second, it requires local and national policies that create tools and reduce barriers for districts to connect and manipulate the essential reform elements to meet student needs. Last, it requires proof points, shared lessons, and incentives to spark and reinforce the process of systemic reform.

One suggestion would be for federal programs to incentivize and reward districts that devise systemic reform solutions that connect the reform elements

around a coherent instructional vision and provide autonomy for schools to make dramatic changes in how they address the diverse needs of their schools. Similar to Race to the Top or SIG, certain design elements applied by the *School Turnarounds* districts could be given funding preference, and it goes without saying that the application and program should be directed toward districts. Weight and preference could also be added for district applications that create partnerships with higher-education institutions or leadership development programs to train strategic reform leaders and allow them to learn and practice within the actual context of struggling schools. Finally, such programs could include a mechanism and funding to produce and disseminate research on effective systemic reform districts, with opportunities for practitioners to convene and discuss lessons learned from their strategies.

It is time we acknowledge the failures of simple reform solutions and focus our efforts on improving districts rather than single schools. While the districts in *School Turnarounds* varied in their needs and strategies, their systemic approaches had many similarities that could be used as a template for systemic reform. Similar to the Long Beach district, the ultimate goal of a coherent district approach would be to eliminate the need for targeted reform efforts because every school in a district is performing up to expectations.

Notes

1. Daniel K. Aladjem et al., *Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development and Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, US Department of Education, 2010).

2. For this and subsequent references to the book *School Turnarounds*, see Heather Zavadsky, *School Turnarounds: The Essential Role of Districts* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012).

3. Throughout this paper, the term "turnaround" implies implementing a dramatic improvement process rather than being limited to a model defined by SIG.

4. Richard F. Elmore, *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Press 2004); Stacey Childress et al., eds., *Managing School Districts for High Performance: Cases in Public Education Leadership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007); and Karin Chenoweth, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007).